



Bozeman Daily Chronicle

OUR OPINION

Brucellosis case is finally stirring needed dialogue

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The discovery of another case of brucellosis in cattle herd in Paradise Valley earlier this year was a troubling development for the state's livestock industry and for Montana's economy as a whole. But the event seems to have finally stirred some serious — and rational — discussion about dealing with the disease, and that could be a good thing.

The greater Yellowstone region's wildlife — elk and bison — is considered to be the last reservoir of the bacteria that causes brucellosis, a disease that can cause cattle to abort their young. The discovery of the disease in Montana cattle means the state will lose its brucellosis-free status, which means Montana producers face expensive measures before they can sell their cattle to out-of-state buyers.

But since that discovery, the state Board of Livestock has voted to reconsider a splitstate status for Montana — where only the Yellowstone region would lose its brucellosis-free status while the rest of the state would be unaffected.

The split-state status makes sense. There's no reason why ranchers hundreds of miles away from the threat should suffer the consequences of the loss of brucellosis-free status. Gov. Brian Schweitzer originally proposed the idea, but it was shot down over objections from the Montana Stockgrowers Association. Now the decision is in the hands of the state veterinarian. Hopefully, he will pursue the more-logical splitstate status for Montana.

And the Board of Livestock invited Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis to its meeting last week. That's a first. And it's an encouraging indication that a new era of communication may be dawning among the agencies involved in the brucellosis issue.

Lewis suggested park bison should be vaccinated for brucellosis. That may be a logistical impossibility, but at least Lewis is acknowledging that the park must be a bigger part of an overall brucellosis strategy.

Less encouraging is the news that talks have stalled on an interstate agreement on livestock disease. Wyoming has balked at entering such an agreement over fears that it would mean the state would be forced to give up some of its authority over wildlife management. Wyoming's wildlife management hinges on elk winter feedgrounds — arguably the biggest promoter of brucellosis in the region.

An interstate livestock disease agreement is crucial to finding a solution to the brucellosis issue. Those talks need to resume, and they should include discussions of ways for Wyoming to phase out the feedgrounds.

Perhaps the most encouraging news is that no new cases of brucellosis in cattle have been found

despite extensive testing in the region. Until something significant changes, however, it's just a matter of time before it happens again.

But at least now government wildlife and livestock officials seem to have come to the realization that bison are not the culprits and the wholesale slaughter of the beasts is not an effective strategy for combating brucellosis.